Florentine Sculpture of the Late 15th Century

Florentine Marble Busts of Boys

Carving marble busts of young boys became a specialty of Florentine sculptors from about 1450 until the end of the fifteenth century. Four fine examples of this art are on view in this room. Together they give an idea not just of the appearance of different children but also of the various approaches that sculptors brought to the same artistic problem.

Some of these busts may be portraits of actual children. Others may be ideal images, made to be displayed in homes as constant reminders of virtuous children. Giovanni Dominici (about 1356–1419), a Florentine Dominican preacher and cardinal, wrote a treatise on family life in which he recommended that images of saintly children, especially Jesus and John the Baptist, be placed in the home to delight and instruct children as they grew up. These sculptured busts are exclusively of boys, although Dominici also mentioned images of young virgins for girls to contemplate. Florentine parents may have considered these busts as an inspirational way to shape a son's character. At the same time, a bust of one's child, shown at his most beautiful and best behaved, could represent the promise of continuity of the family and the Florentine Republic.

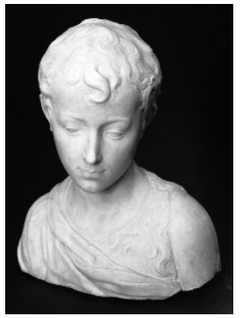
Desiderio da Settignano
Florentine, 1428/1430–1464

The Christ Child (?), c. 1460

In contrast to the wide-eyed innocence of *A Little Boy*, also on view in this gallery, this bust shows an alert, impish child eager to interact with his world. His thick hair flows in flamelike waving tufts. The irises and pupils of his eyes are carved as if to sparkle. With his chin tucked under and his lips pressed together, this holy child seems barely able to control his smile.

From sometime before 1756 until 1940, this bust was installed above a doorway next to the high altar in the Oratory of San Francesco of the Vanchettoni in Florence. Antonio Rossellino's *Young Saint John the Baptist* of about 1470, also in this gallery, was displayed above an opposite door. The backs of both busts were flattened so that they could be attached to the wall. Each had a small hole drilled in the crown of its head to hold a metal halo. This evidence suggests that Desiderio's boy was intended to be an image of the Christ child. It is equally possible that the bust originated as a portrait of a Florentine child and was given sacred identity at a later date.

Marble, .305 x .265 x .163 m (12 x 10 ⅜ x 6 ⅜ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.94



Antonio Rossellino
Florentine, 1427–1479

The Young Saint John the Baptist, c. 1470

For at least 180 years, this bust and Desiderio da Settignano's *Christ Child (?)* were displayed together in the Florentine Oratory of San Francesco of the Vanchettoni. A patron saint of the city of Florence, the young John the Baptist—here already identified by the camel skin garment he wore in the desert as an adult—was a favorite subject in Florentine art during the Renaissance. Around 1410 the Dominican theologian Cardinal Giovanni Dominici recommended that images of the Christ child and young John the Baptist be displayed together in the home for the religious and moral instruction of children.

Here, John is depicted as an adolescent, several years older than Desiderio's child. With his inclined head, downcast eyes, and introspective expression, he contrasts markedly with the openness of the Christ child. The elegant winding curls, undulating lips, and quiet mood create an image reminiscent of a marble god from classical antiquity.

Antonio Rossellino was born in Florence about 1427. After training in the workshop of his eldest brother Bernardo, he worked with Desiderio da Settignano. As an independent artist, he became one of the most accomplished sculptors in Florence in the 1460s and 1470s.

Marble, .347 x .298 x .161 m (13 ⅝ x 11 ¾ x 6 ¼ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.79

TIMELINE

1396	Greek first taught in Florence, launching revival of classical learning
1401	Contest to design bronze doors for Florence Baptistery; Brunelleschi and Ghiberti introduce motifs from classical sculpture in their competition panels
1418–1436	Brunelleschi constructs gigantic dome on the Florence Cathedral
1435	Alberti writes treatise *On Painting*, describing a method for perspective drafting
1452	Ghiberti completes bronze *Gates of Paradise* for east portal of Baptistery, Florence
1453	Donatello's monumental bronze *Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata* erected in Padua, the first since antiquity
	Mino da Fiesole reinvents the marble portrait bust with portraits of the brothers Piero and Giovanni de' Medici
	Constantinople conquered by Ottoman Turks, ending Byzantine Empire; Greek scholars and artists emigrate to Italy
1470s	Platonic Academy founded by Florentine scholars
1486–1492	First printed edition of Vitruvius' ancient treatise *On Architecture*
1492	Verrocchio's bronze *Equestrian Statue of Colleoni* erected in Venice
1497–1500	Michelangelo carves *Pietà* for St. Peter's, Rome
1506	Bramante begins building new St. Peter's, Rome
1508–1512	Michelangelo frescoes Sistine Chapel ceiling, Rome
1510–1511	Raphael frescoes *School of Athens* in Papal Library, Rome
1527	Rome sacked by Spanish and German mercenary armies of Emperor Charles V

Desiderio da Settignano

A Little Boy, 1455/1460

This bust of an infant, without any attributes to identify him as a religious figure, may have been created as a portrait of an actual child. Carved of pure white marble, it presents its young subject with a solemn but relaxed expression. The eyes, with uncarved irises and pupils, possess a timeless, classical character, while the slight asymmetry and skillful handling of the marble create a sense of life and movement. The deeply cut mouth falls open. Soft wisps of hair fall loosely over the ears and forehead. The sensitive carving of the stone to convey the resilience of young flesh and the silky texture of a child's hair is characteristic of Desiderio's best work.

Desiderio was born in the quarry town of Settignano, where his father was a stone cutter. Perhaps trained in the Florentine studio of Bernardo Rossellino, Desiderio had established himself as an independent master in that city by 1453. His work, like that of the Rossellino brothers Antonio and Bernardo, filled a vigorous demand for portraits, religious images, and church furnishings. During his short career, Desiderio was celebrated for his skill in creating marble busts of women and young children.

Marble, .263 x .247 x .150 m (10 ⅜ x 9 ¾ x 5 ⅞ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.113

Antonio Rossellino

The Young Saint John the Baptist, c. 1455

This bust of Saint John the Baptist demonstrates the stylistic diversity possible in the treatment of a subject. With his carved pupils and direct, outward gaze, this youthful figure has an air of wide-eyed innocence that differs greatly from the introspective mood of the nearby bust attributed to the same sculptor. The cheeks are fuller and softer in appearance. The hair, parted in the center and flowing down the neck in long, sweeping waves, contrasts with the shorter, elegantly curled locks on the other bust of John. Here, also, John wears the camel's-hair tunic associated with his adulthood beneath his loosely draped mantle. Straps of the tunic's leather fastening curl delicately over his shoulder.

This life-size bust suggests Rossellino paid close attention to the works of Desiderio da Settignano, who died in 1464. In the later 1460s and 1470s, Antonio Rossellino's studio became an important training ground for the next generation of sculptors.

Marble, .397 x .336 x .178 m (15 ½ x 13 ⅛ x 7 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.142

Techniques of Sculpture

The Italian works in this and adjacent galleries represent two distinct approaches to making sculpture: by adding or by removing material. In the first method, works are built up, or modeled, using clay, plaster, or wax. When fired, clay becomes durable *terracotta* (Italian for "baked earth"). In rare cases, objects made of unbaked clay, such as the *Putto Poised on a Globe* attributed to Verrocchio, have survived the centuries. Models from unbaked clay, plaster, or wax could also be cast in bronze.

In the second method, practiced in Italy since ancient times, sculpture is created by removing material, that is, by carving in stone or wood. To transform marble blocks into figures, a master sculptor and his assistants first removed the bulk of the rough stone with metal punches and flat chisels. Working from clay or wax models, drawings, or both, they then refined the forms with toothed or clawed chisels. At the final stage, they smoothed and polished the work with files and abrasives such as pumice or emery. Sculptors sometimes drilled holes into the stone to create curls, decorative patterns, and deeply shadowed hollows for ears, nostrils, or eyes. Chisel marks are visible in the partially unfinished and recut *David of the Casa Martelli*. Extensive drill work produced the ornamental patterns in the relief of *Alexander the Great*.

Sculptors could also achieve remarkably subtle effects by carving marble in low relief. In stone barely one-inch deep they could suggest spacious environments replete with trees, clouds, buildings, and distant figures. This style of relief, pioneered by the fifteenth-century master Donatello, is called *rilievo schiacciato,* or flat relief. Examples may be seen in Domenico Gagini's *Nativity* and in Desiderio da Settignano's *Saint Jerome*.

A preference for vivid colors on the surfaces of sculpture emerged during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Terracotta works were often painted and gilded, as is the standing *Madonna and Child* or Benedetto da Maiano's *Saint John the Baptist*. They could also be colored through the more complicated process of glazing. Pigments were applied to terracotta sculpture along with *frit,* a transparent, fusible glass in granular form. The sculpture was then fired a second time to produce brilliant glassy colors. The Della Robbia family of artists was especially known for this type of sculpture.

A limited number of colors could be used for glazing terracotta, but these could be skillfully modulated to create the illusion of grass or clouds. Even stone sculpture was often highlighted with color or gilding. Such treatment appears in the gilded hair and hems of Jacopo della Quercia's *Madonna and Child* and in the ornamental bands on the garments of the fourteenth-century *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* from Verona.

Using a practice widely accepted in the Renaissance, replicas of well-loved devotional sculpture were sometimes made using molds taken from a clay or stone model. The stucco *Madonna and Child with Angels* was cast from a marble relief now in Vienna. Della Robbia works, like *The Adoration of the Child* and the *Madonna and Child with Cherubim*, exist in several versions. Such sculpture reminds us that even a cast work could be highly refined through the skilled finishing of the master.

Andrea del Verrocchio, *Putto Poised on a Globe*, probably 1480, Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.128; Bernardo or Antonio Rossellino, *The David of the Casa Martelli*, c. 1461/1479, Widener Collection 1942.9.115; Florentine, 15th Century, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1425, Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.112; Verona, 14th Century, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, 1321, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.95; Andrea della Robbia, *The Adoration of the Child*, after 1477, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.1.2

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.